

Lesser-known form of asbestos lurks in many homes

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Lesser-known form of asbestos lurks in many homes

Saturday, July 14, 2001

San Francisco Chronicle
CHRONICLE SECTIONS

Jay Romano, New York Times

Most homeowners are aware of the risks associated with asbestos insulation found on steam and hot water pipes and on heating plants in basements and boiler rooms.

Relatively few are aware, however, of another possible source of asbestos in the home -- as a contaminant in an insulation product known as vermiculite, the stuff used for years by gardeners as a moisture-retaining additive for potting soil.

"We estimate that probably as many as 10 million homes in the United States have had vermiculite insulation installed in them," said Dr. Christopher Weis, regional toxicologist for the federal Environmental Protection Agency in Denver.

And while it is not yet clear how much of that vermiculite is contaminated with asbestos -- or, if it is, to what degree -- Weis said that it is reasonable to suspect that most vermiculite in homes contains at least some asbestos.

"As far as we know, about 80 percent of the vermiculite mined in this country came from Zonolite Mountain in Libby, Mont.," he said, adding that the substance was used in several consumer products. One of those products, he said, was Zonolite, a granular insulation that could be poured into wall cavities and between joists in the attic.

"Instead of buying batts of insulation, homeowners would buy a bag of loose vermiculite and throw it between the joists," he said, adding that it was also used to provide the texture in textured ceiling sprays.

Weis said that in most cases, vermiculite

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becomes contaminated with asbestos because the two minerals form under the same geological conditions. So when vermiculite is mined, the ore often contains asbestos.

While all asbestos is harmful and can cause lung cancer and other diseases, he said, the asbestos fiber usually found in vermiculite -- tremolite -- is particularly dangerous.

(Exposure to any product that can release asbestos fibers into the air, even the garden soil additive, is potentially dangerous, he said.)

Thomas Simons, a spokesman in Washington for the federal agency's Office of Pollution Prevention, said that the first thing a homeowner should do is determine whether vermiculite insulation has been installed.

"You can usually identify vermiculite just by looking at it," Simons said, adding that the material is a small, spongy-looking nugget that varies in color from brown-gold to gray-brown to silver-gold.

"If you have it, the next question is whether it's contaminated with asbestos," he said, adding that such a determination can be made only by a professional in a laboratory setting.

Such professionals can usually be found in the Yellow Pages under Asbestos Consulting and Testing, or Asbestos Abatement. A basic test to determine whether vermiculite is contaminated by asbestos costs about \$100 and up, depending on the number of samples taken.

But even if the vermiculite is contaminated, it may not be necessary to remove it. "If the insulation is not disturbed and doesn't become airborne, there's very little risk," Simons said.

"So if you have vermiculite insulation that was installed 20 or 30 years ago, and it's sealed behind wallboards or floorboards or isolated in an attic that is vented to the outside, then the best approach would be to keep it in place."

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On the other hand, he said, if there is any chance that contaminated vermiculite can become airborne by being disturbed -- such as by being blown about in an attic or by improvements that involve cutting holes in ceilings or walls -- then it is probably wise to have the insulation removed. "But if you do decide to remove it, do not attempt to remove it yourself," Simons said.

Cathleen Collela, chief executive officer of the Hazardous Elimination Corp., an asbestos abatement contractor in Farmingdale, Long Island, agreed.

"The greatest danger when dealing with asbestos comes from disturbing it," Collela said. "It's a rather insidious contaminant that can get airborne very easily. And once it's airborne, it can then find its way into your lungs."

Collela said that since the danger posed by airborne asbestos is so great, particular care should be taken when hiring an asbestos removal contractor.

"I would get at least three contractors to come in, tell me what they're going to do, how they're going to do it, and how much they're going to charge," she said.

Depending on the extent and location of the contamination, the cost to remove asbestos can easily range into the thousands of dollars.

Accordingly, she said, if the estimates among the contractors vary significantly, it would probably be wise to audition additional contractors so that unusually high or low bids become obvious.

Generally speaking, she said, a competent contractor will explain to the homeowner exactly how the remediation will take place. The contractor should indicate how he intends to seal off the area being worked on and how he will create a negative pressure zone to ensure that no contaminated air escapes into other areas.

Contractors should also use a wet removal process, she said, in which the insulation is

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GET PROOF OF DISPOSAL

"And the most important thing is to make sure you do not have to pay the contractor's final payment until you have in your hand a manifest proving that the contaminated material was disposed of properly," Collela said, referring to the shipping document used to prove that hazardous material has been properly discarded at an approved hazardous-waste disposal site.

Generally speaking, she said, holding back anywhere from 25 to 35 percent of the contractor's final bill would not be unusual.

It is also wise -- and, in many cases, required by law, depending on the state and the size of the job -- to hire an independent contractor to monitor air quality both during and after remediation.

Lance Gangemi, regional director of the Manhattan office of Hygienetics Environmental Services, a national environmental consulting firm, said that in addition to collecting a series of air samples while work is in progress -- and then certifying that air quality is acceptable at the completion of the job -- the air monitoring firm acts as the eyes and ears of the homeowner.

"The project manager basically makes sure that the contractor is doing the work in accordance with the applicable regulations," he said.

EXPENSE OF AIR MONITOR

The cost of the air monitor, he said, will depend on the length and complexity of the job. In most cases, he said, charges are billed on a per-shift basis. "You're usually looking at about \$500 for an eight-hour shift," he said, adding that 10 to 15 air samples are taken on a typical shift.

Additional information on vermiculite insulation is on the Environmental Protection Agency's Web site at www.epa.gov/asbestos/insulation.htm or at the

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agency's hot line: (202) 554-1404.

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